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COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

Perceptions of a Small-Town Political Activist, Compared
With the Principles Found in Research Materials

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Dye and Ziegler, political scientists, postulate that our country is run by a plural elite, composed of well educated, affluent men. Saul Alinsky, radical organizer, teaches change agents that they must work in the system and accept the world as it is, not as they wish it were. Machiavelli, the early Italian pragmatist, wrote "The Prince" to instruct the 'Haves' in methods to keep their power and prevent the 'Have Nots' from siezing power. He wrote, "A prudent ruler can not and should not observe faith when such observance is to his disadvantage." A more recent Italian political scientist, Gaetano Mosca, stated that it was inevitable that elites and not masses would govern all societies, because elites possess organization and unity of purpose.

I have set out to comprehend the system as it now operates. I wish to effect changes in the system in Santa Barbara County to improve the status of women.

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors represent Dye and Ziegler's classic sub-elite. They are upper middle class men, most, if not all of whom, are eager to retain their superior status. After the politically expedient act of appointing a Commission on the Status of Women, they were very reluctant to give us any support of credibility. Alinsky says, "It is the schizophrenia of a free society that we outwardly espouse faith in the people but inwardly have strong doubts whether the people can be trusted. It is when people have a genuine opportunity to act and to change conditions that they begin to think their problems through--and look for answers. A powerless people will not be purposefully curious about life."

It has become obvious that the appointing elite did not expect us to effect any significant changes. They have expressed surprise at our efforts to educate the community about women's problems. The derision of some supervisors has been very open when we've appeared before them to ask for help in the form of secretarial services and conference expenses.

I have had some success in paving the way for change. Alinsky says a revolutionary organizer must shake up prevailing patterns of people's lives: agitate, create disenchantment and discontent with the current values. This is to produce, if not a passion for change, at least a passive affirmative non-challenging climate. I designed and moderated two workshops to raise the consciousness of women and those who work with women. The level of discontent has risen appreciably among many with whom I've worked. Because I plan to remain in my community, I cannot adopt the most radical tactics postulated by Alinsky. Nor am I prepared

emotionally, to provoke members of the power structure in the manner prescribed by Alinsky. He says, " The job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a dangerous enemy, in that the establishment reveals its fear of the organizer, its fear that he represents a threat to its omnipotence."

Dye and Ziegler stated that, "Persons who are successful at the game of democratic politics are more amenable to abiding by the rules of the game than those who are not. Moreover, many elite members have internalized democratic values learned in childhood. Finally, the achievement of high position may bring a sense of responsibility for, and an awareness of societal values." Time will tell whether our local elite will yield to information, rationally given. Otherwise, as Alinsky says, "Action comes from keeping the heat on. No politician can sit on a hot issue if you keep it hot enough."

We're working now to organize local women in a Women's Concerns Council. There is a great deal of dissent among those on the organizing committee. The black and Chicana members are eager to provide a forum where minority women can ventilate their concerns. So far, they don't comprehend that they lack enough power to effect changes by themselves. Their only hope is to form a coalition with white middle class women who have the organizational experience and the luxury of time and money to work on change. Alinsky suggests we search out leaders in middle class organizations, identify major issues, find areas of common agreement, excite their imagination with tactics that can introduce drama and adventure into the tedium of middle class life. We did this through our rape workshop and women's concerns workshop.

He said that the opposition's reaction will provide radicalization of the middle class. Time will tell whether this be true here.

I am very frustrated about facilitating a consensus. So many women are still at the point of playing "ain't it awful"! Still others have not perceived how awful it is. They are the ones who have been so well conditioned, from birth, to accept their roles as society dictates.

The Santa Barbara Commission on the Status of Women is composed of elites, members of the plural elite. Most members are white, middle class women. Our "black" members are difficult to recognize as such. They have obviously been long removed from the most serious discrimination and poverty suffered by many blacks. The Chicanas have been painfully ambivalent about working with us. They have exhibited fear of being co-opted by the Anglo power structure and culture. They have cooperated little in commission projects, preferring to work mostly in Chicano sponsored programs.

According to a comparative study of community power made by Agger, Goldrich and Swanson, based on citizen participation and competition, Santa Barbara has a "competitive mass" power structure. Here, "many citizens share political influence and two or more leadership groups compete with each other."

The "Rulers and the Ruled" study showed our competitive mass structure is pluralist and is related to a 'developed democracy' regime. A sense of political effectiveness among citizens and adherence to the rules of the games by leaders is essential for the development of broad citizen participation in community affairs and the emergence of competitive leadership groups.

Santa Barbarans still hold hope for participatory democracy. Those who have attended Status of Women Commission meetings throughout the county have been representatives of all socio-economic and ethnic groups. We've heard testimony from articulate, ambitious women and poor shy women who expressed appreciation for our interest in Guadalupe's people. The audience usually numbers less than ten.

The commission meetings are quite informal. Comments from the audience are encouraged. Many decisions have been influenced by the testimony we've heard.

There is often consensus by the commissioners, but basic conflicts sometimes surface. We do, after all, come with our own unique backgrounds and private agendas.

I believe, with Alinsky, "That if people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions. The alternative to this would be rule by the elite." He observed that, "History is a relay of revolutions. The torch of idealism is carried by a revolutionary group until this group becomes the establishment and then quietly the torch is put down to wait until a new revolutionary group picks it up for the next leg of the run." I am eager to see how long we run this time. Indeed, we are burning torches, not bras. The feminist movement is gaining strength and I'm excited to be a small part of it. Time will tell how effectively I translate my lessons into improving the status of women in Santa Barbara County.



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